



Developing Sustainable Energy Projects, SEAI

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland are supporting communities to develop community owned sustainable energy projects. The primary way of achieving this is by supporting communities to form Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) and supporting communities in developing Energy Masterplans, Energy Audits, feasibility studies and accessing funding.



Interview Questions and Responses

How do communities agree the key objectives that projects aim to deliver?

The first step communities must take is to establish a Community Charter in order to develop an Energy Masterplan as part of SEC. As part of this process, communities identify their core aim and areas of interest across:

- Renewable Energy
- Energy Efficiency & Savings
- Low Carbon Community
- Energy Education and Behaviour
- Sustainable Transport
- Fuel Poverty

The Community Charter is influenced by an existing committee or sub-committee of an active community group, which shapes the objectives of a Sustainable Energy Community and the subsequent projects they want to deliver.

How do communities decide upon a single project idea?

Energy Masterplans are key for communities to understand the magnitude of benefits and to which organisations. Following this, communities identify projects by undertaking Energy Audits, leading to a register of opportunities across a community with identified costs and benefits for particular projects.

Describe the process by which communities achieve consensus around objectives and projects?

Sustainable energy projects don't initially have community consensus.

For example, a community may resist projects situated away from the community and going beyond a community boundary. However, projects must follow an open and inclusive membership model if funded by the SEAI and the SEC must work closely with community members in an open forum to arrive at a consensus.



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How do communities typically approach planning and project management around a selected idea?

SECs should have individuals with technical engineering skills to enable strong project management. For example, having individuals who have developed infrastructure projects. Individuals with a finance or community development background are also important for overseeing project delivery.

How do communities revise their plans? How do they typically manage that process?

Communities which are designated SECs often have a finance contact and project coordinator who can directly deal with small-scale changes. If communities revise their plans substantially, requests for changes come via SEC Boards.

How do communities identify a funding need?

SECs can attend a range of SEAI workshops, utilise bi-monthly newsletters and a mentor specifically dedicated to them. Communities typically use these methods for identifying a funding source, based upon costs uncovered in feasibility studies previously undertaken.

How do communities manage the process of bidding for funding?

The process for bidding is led by SECs and supported by SEAI Project Coordinators.

What type of specialist expertise are typically required for projects? How do communities handle that and approach experts?

SEAI provide a panel of trusted advisors free of charge and we can direct SECs to specific expertise for developing projects.

In addition, the SEAI provide a pre-feasibility service for sustainable energy projects to consider viability.

SECs typically approach the SEAI directly through SEAI Project Coordinators to identify specialist expertise.

What have been the hardest difficulties for communities overcome and how do they overcome them?

The largest difficulty is reaching commercialisation stage and sustainable energy projects often require larger scale finance than provided by the SEAI. SECs therefore have to identify potential other private or public funding sources, or potentially launch a community ownership model.

Do communities often stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not?

Although SECs do stay true to their project vision, all options to achieve a net zero target should be open to discussion. For example, the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative require 2.5MW of wind to be carbon neutral but they are constrained by grid capacity and are open to considering multiple forms of technology to reaching their goal.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of community projects?

SECs must be honest and transparent about the process and work closely with communities to deliver community energy projects.

In parallel, SECs must have an awareness of government policy and potential outcomes for shaping community energy, such as actions taken to shape local grid connections.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in delivering projects?

Having the vision of what the SEC wants to achieve is critical for developing successful projects. Having a shared vision enables the design of projects to drive the vision.

Undertaking a feasibility study for potential projects is an important decision to take as communities can identify potential grid connections, sites and options for projects.

What are the most important sources of advice and guidance for communities as they move through the different phases of projects?

The key sources include SEAI toolkits, Community Power as a leader in Ireland for community owned energy, LEADER Local Action Groups, Local Development Companies and County Councils.

Key contact

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Links

Website: <https://www.seai.ie/community-energy/sustainable-energy-communities/start-an-energy-community/index.xml>